

DIRECT CERTIFICATION IN THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM STATE IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS, SCHOOL YEAR 2014-2015 REPORT TO CONGRESS - SUMMARY

Introduction

This report responds to the requirement of Public Law 110-246 to assess the effectiveness of State and local efforts to directly certify children for free school meals. Direct certification is a process conducted by the States and by local educational agencies (LEAs) to certify eligible children for free meals without the need for household applications.

In school year (SY) 2014-15, an estimated 91 percent of school-age Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants were directly certified for free meals. This represents a four-percentage-point improvement from SY 2013-2014.

Eligibility for Program Benefits

Children from households with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty level are eligible for free school meals. Children from households with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals.

Certain homeless, runaway, and migrant children and children from households that receive benefits under SNAP, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program, or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) are deemed "categorically eligible" for free school meals.

Direct Certification

Student eligibility for free meals is determined by application or by direct certification. Although direct certification systems vary by State and LEA, all such systems are designed to eliminate the need for paper applications. LEAs are required to conduct direct certification three times per year: once at or around the start of the school year, and again 3 and 6 months after that initial effort.

All direct certification systems match student enrollment lists against SNAP agency records and the records of other assistance agencies whose participants are categorically eligible for free meals. The matching

process, whether automated or manual, requires no action by the children's parents or guardians.

The Child Nutrition and WIC* Reauthorization Act of 2004 required all LEAs to directly certify SNAP participant children by SY 2008-2009. Just 56 percent of LEAs directly certified some SNAP participants in SY 2004-2005, 1 year prior to the phased implementation of the 2004 Act's direct certification mandate. By SY 2014-2015, that number had grown to 95 percent.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) instituted several additional reforms to strengthen and expand direct certification. These include:

- Establishing a multi-State demonstration project to begin directly certifying income-eligible children in SY 2012-2013 with data from State Medicaid systems;
- Providing performance awards for States with successful or improved direct certification systems;
- Requiring States to adopt improvement plans if their SNAP direct certification rates fall below 80 percent in SY 2011-2012, 90 percent in SY 2012-2013, or 95 percent in subsequent years; and
- Ending the letter method as a means of direct certification.

State Performance Measures

This report presents information on the outcomes of direct certification for SY 2014-2015. The report estimates the number of school-age SNAP participants and the number of children directly certified with SNAP for free school meals in each State. The ratio of these figures is a measure of the success of State and local systems to directly certify participating SNAP children. The report also estimates the number of all SNAP, TANF, and FDPIR participants certified for free school meals, either by direct certification or by application. This provides a more comprehensive measure of State success in certifying categorically eligible children for free school meals.

The methodology for calculating the performance measure was refined beginning with the SY 2013-2014 report to make use of data elements from the revised Verification Collection Report (FNS-742) and the Direct Certification Rate Data Element Report (FNS-834). The refined formula provides an improved measure of the success of State and local systems to directly certify SNAP-participant children. This revised methodology produces results that are not precisely comparable to reports prior to SY 2013-2014.

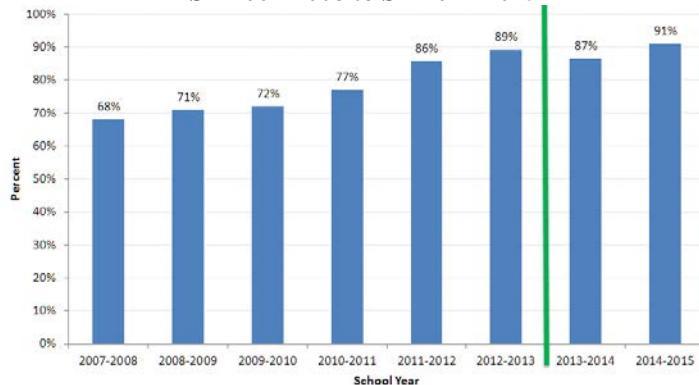
Key Findings

States and LEAs directly certified 11.1 million children – 9.8 million children based on participation in SNAP and 1.3 million children based on participation in other programs. This total represents a decrease of 11 percent from the previous year. SY 2014-2015 was the first year the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) was available nationwide for eligible LEAs. Similar to other special provisions, LEAs participating in CEP offer all students free meals and do not collect annual individual eligibility information. To capture the number of SNAP-participant students in special provision schools for the direct certification performance measure, States report the number of students likely be matched with SNAP records if the LEA was not participating in a special provision. When this count of SNAP-participant students in CEP and special provision schools in non-base years is added to the total, 15.1 million children were directly certified in SY 2014-2015 compared to 14.5 million children in SY 2013-2014, an increase of 4 percent.

In SY 2014-15, an estimated 91 percent of school-age SNAP participants were directly certified for free meals. This represents a four-percentage-point improvement from SY 2013-2014.

National Average Direct Certification Rate

SY 2007-2008 to SY 2014-2015



The overall certification rate of categorically eligible children, by direct certification or by application, was almost 100 percent in SY 2014-2015, which was

consistent with SY 2013-2014 results. Note: The components of this measure are subject to reporting and estimation error, and therefore, do not necessarily reflect certification of every categorically eligible child.

The number of LEAs directly certifying SNAP-participant children continued to increase in SY 2014-2015. The use of direct certification is universal for larger LEAs with over 10,000 enrolled students; 99 percent for LEAs with enrollments of 1,000 to 9,999 and 98 percent for LEAs with 500 to 999 enrolled students. Direct certification is slightly less prevalent among smaller LEAs with 91 percent of LEAs with fewer than 500 students, directly certifying some SNAP participants in SY 2014-2015.

Twenty-three States and the District of Columbia achieved direct certification rates at or above HHFKA's 95-percent performance target, which is twice as many States as the previous school year. The remaining States and Guam must develop and implement continuous improvement plans.

State Best Practices

Six States with successful or improved direct certification systems were interviewed for this report. States link direct certification performance improvements to improving data system capability, the use of automated processes and employing probabilistic matching. Others added tools such as automated emails to remind LEAs to download match lists, or applications to validate street addresses. Many of these changes were made with an eye toward meeting the performance benchmarks set forth in HHFKA.

State Best Practices

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, "Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress, School Year 2014-2015, Report to Congress" by Quinn Moore, Kevin Conway, Brandon Kyler, and Andrew Gothro. Project Officer Dennis Ranalli. Report CN-15-DC. Alexandria, VA: October 2016.

Download full report:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/ops/child-nutrition-programs>